

There is a [w]hole Metropolis in the 3rd Realm

Amplifying Poetics in the In-Between: a Meaning – through Design – for the Reinvention of the Polis.

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Abstract. The Story of a Servant. A PhD in Architecture by and through design demands the researcher to be the servant of the shift of thought and context, which is not the blind but comforting navigation on the automatic pilot of a prescriptive set of rules. 'The Story of a Servant' is a compact 'Crime Scene Reconstruction' of the author's past and childhood, looking for his discovery of 'Polis and Poetics'. The Story of a Supermodel of a Goddess is a report about an inner dialogue between a scale model and its maker, during the designing and the making, and it is designed as a powerful medium of communication between the self and the outside world. Poetics: a Catalyst for the reinvention of the Polis: in this chapter, 'The Reinvention of the Polis through Poetics' comes into the centre of the discourse. It is a synthesis of the actual state of this research and a basis for further investigation. My Life is over? Conclusions: here, a bottom line is drawn and a set of recommendations is put forward by/for the author as a possible framework for the research to be done in the future.

Keywords. Poetics; Polis; inner dialogue; (virtual) third person; scale model.

Preliminary remark on the title of this essay

'The Third Realm' is not at all a reference to the geopolitical concept of the Nazi's. It is part of the participatory discourse of David Adjaye, 'the Third Space', by which he explains his points of view concerning the relationship between the public space and individual building, emerging out of the spontaneous situation (Enwezor, 2006).

The 'Realm' comes from the discourse of Aldo Van Eyck, who introduced 'The In-Between Realm' (Ligtelijn and Strauven, 2008).

The Story of a Servant

In four chapters, this kaleidoscopic text combines 'Poetics' and 'Polis' as the central themes in the architectural commitment and the architecture of the author with appropriate design-research steps, altogether reflecting the actual state of his PhD.

The essay is also an introduction to a series of design workshops with students of a third year program in architectural education at the Sint-Lucas School of Architecture Brussels/Ghent.

The essay and the workshops are a scholarly step in the preparation of a PhD.

A PhD in Architecture by and through design demands the researcher to be the servant of the shift of thought and context, which is not the blind but comforting navigation on the automatic pilot of a prescriptive set of rules. So, where are the stars to navigate on?

To find this out, this chapter is a compact 'Crime Scene Reconstruction' of the author's past and childhood, looking for the 'stars' that formed his constellation and commitment to Polis and Poetics. Within the limited framework of this essay, this chapter tries for a rather 'poetic' synthesis otherwise difficult to grasp.

The Childhood

The drawing of 'Houses and Streets in a Landscape' (Van Den Berghe, 1965-69) and the 'Invented Cities Zero' (Van Den Berghe, 1970-75) were the author's very start for his inventio of a world as it should be, by design. These creatures helped him to escape from a dull Cold War reality.

Wanting to focus on the Cities, the author would like to leave the 'Houses and Streets in a Landscape' out of this essay and preserve them as a subject for a later occasion.

The 'Invented Cities Zero' are designs for imaginary cities and contained railroads, docklands, freeway intersections and dense solids and open voids forming an urban fabric. They were the theatre of economic and ideological activities that spiced the designs to become 'real', with the inner dialogue as an instrument of empathy.

But it was the waterfront of cities that inspired him most of all, since he walked on the pier with his mother, in July, in Ostend, in 1965, looking through the chinks between the wooden timber, seeing the shiny rippling of the water of the sea beneath, hearing the sound that corresponded with the smell of foamy green-grey seaweed. Big ships coming and going in and out the harbor encouraged his fascination for very refined scale models of ships to be built in a future nearby and for detailed drawings and scale models of the harbors and cities gratefully receiving them. Whilst going home by train his metal interest for smart railway constructions took a shape.

The Adolescence

The ships remained in the author's mind and would always do so, pointing him towards the study of mathematics as a preparation to become an engineer in shipbuilding. Shipyards were his favorite biotopes to wander in. Those skin and bone constructions, beams and columns with bolts and sheets of rusty steel with welded seams seemed to be able to resist the pressure of the water of the sea combined with fierce and violent attacks of stormy winds. Not only the science that made this work possible was it that fascinated him, but also the poetic dream it represented: to navigate on stars in the middle of a vast

and endless 'nowhere' but definitely going 'somewhere'. Oh Odysseus! Oh Penelope! Was it easy to resist the seductive call of Sirenes, to avoid the rocky cliffs of Lorelei? No, it wasn't, since this was also the time for the author to discover the girls in their utmost beauty of appearance...

And then the sense and use of Poetics emerged to him! The ship was his instrument and it had to be beautiful to attract the attention of 'the girl', his Poetics became his method to reach her ear and heart and to convince her of all the good things to come, the Polis was the labyrinthine garden of stone where the Tower stood where she was hiding in. And now it was up to him to use his skills and instruments to bring her to the liberated land of knowledge. What a glorious moment that would be...!

So now the servant has found his 'ship' and his 'stars' of his own past to navigate on through introspection, so it must be possible for him to start his quest.

The Story of a Supermodel of a Goddess

The scale model is designed, so it is a design. It can be a design of a design, maybe a design that already is (materialized) or a design that will be (materialized). It is submitted to the same processes as a design as we know it.

It is designed as a design tool and as a communication tool (which is basically the same).

The scale model as a method has traceable links with the author's past, as described in 'The Story of a Servant'. This chapter is a description post factum of an inner dialogue between a scale model and its maker, during the design process, the process of making and communicating of/with this model.

The author's further examination of the games he played as a young boy, acknowledging that nothing can be as serious and innovative as the honesty of a child's game, has been the basis on which the method of production of this scale model has been developed and applied.

So it is about the re-discovery of the 'self' as the basis for the subject, the reason and the method of a PhD: the what? the why? and the how?

Three scale models ['Supermodels of a Goddess'] have been produced as a case which is a scholarly step in a PhD, meant to investigate the potential of the scale model, not only as a design-research tool but most of all as a tool of communication of Polis and Poetics.

Two imaginary cities containing poetic versions of three of the author's own architectural designs have been produced. One has been made for a London exhibition in July-August 2008 at Westminster University, School of Architecture and the Built Environment ['The London Tapes One'] and a second one for a Brussels exhibition in September 2008 at Sint-Lucas School of Architecture ['The Brussels Tapes'].

A third scale model has been designed and produced with students of the third year (together with students of the second year) of architectural education in Sint-Lucas School of Architecture Ghent [“There is a Town, unlike Any Other”] in an intensive and extended design workshop in November-December 2008, resulting in an exhibition of this Town in January 2009 at Sint-Lucas School of Architecture / Sint-Lucas School of Visual Arts, Ghent.

This method of research and communication really being applied on the field ‘proves’ its applicability. This can be deduced from the fieldwork that has been done by the author during and subsequent to the designing, the making and the exhibition of the scale models.

‘The London Tapes One’ has been submitted to interviews, in which visitors were asked to answer five standard questions about what the scale model was about according to them, based on what they saw and experienced. Four out of five mentioned the words ‘Urban’ and ‘Poetics’ as the most important ‘message’ of the scale model. Since ‘the urban tendency’ and ‘poetics in architecture’ are the subject of the PhD they also were the intended core of the scale models. So the outcome of this questionnaire was encouraging to the author in terms of ‘a method that works’.

‘The Brussels Tapes’ has been (re)-designed with the results of the interviews of ‘The London Tapes One’ in mind, in that ‘The Brussels Tapes’ has become the more dense and intense version of ‘The London Tapes One’. Subsequently, ‘The Brussels Tapes’ has been submitted to a similar interview test during the Research Training Sessions 8 at Sint-Lucas School of Architecture Brussels in September 2008. During these sessions, other participants were asked what the scale model communicated to them, and again four out of five of them came up with ‘Poetics’ and ‘Urban’ very soon, not only as two separate conceptions, but as an integrated vision on the urban tendency and the poetic content on which the urban tendency should be constructed. So again, the outcome of this session was encouraging.

Subsequently, the author designed the assignment text for a workshop with third year students in architecture, keeping in mind the results of the questionnaires and sessions during and after ‘The London Tapes One’ and ‘The Brussels Tapes’. Those results were communicated in a lecture to the students as basic information for this workshop in November-December 2008, resulting in an exhibition of their final scale model of this invented city in January 2009 at Sint-Lucas School of Architecture / Sint-Lucas School of Visual Arts, Ghent. This design exercise, really focusing on urban dwelling organically emerging from public space through poetic transitions finally coming private intimacy has been very well informed by the two former scale models ‘London’ and ‘Brussels’, which -looking at the student’s results- have proven to be so.

To design and to make a Supermodel

Since the creation of architecture will always be a fusion of thought (knowledge, the head) and physical action (skills, the hands), the act of designing and the act of making are brought together in an interwoven process. And so is the designing and the making of scale models as design-research tools and tools of communication. So the act of making is not the final and self-assured step at the end of the process of designing, but the stumbling walk towards an uncertain goal, interrupted by doubts and gloomy hesitations in decision-making.

“The process of continuous probing and focusing on imaginary constructs is the key to the final realization of the construct”. (Antoniades, 1990)

At first, the interwoven process is informed by the Poetic Image [the Embryo] with which every projection of something to come in the future starts. This Poetic Image is constantly adjusted by the attention for the emergence of unexpected Poetics ‘on the road’ based on the maker’s awareness of their existence. This is the fundamental synthesis, expressed by the Greek word ‘Poiesis’, which means ‘the act of making’ in the first place, and ‘poetry’ in its second significance, on its turn inseparably connected to ‘the act of making’ and always being part of it or even really being ‘in’ it, since in architecture like in other circumstances we are gifted with emotions. We are gently poisoned with subjective expectations whom we point the direction of our actions at in order to obtain the self fulfilling prophecy or the realization of the Poetic Image of our wishful thinking.... And the one who proclaims: “This is wrong!”, does not know a single bit about the act of making architecture....

From the moment a scale model is ‘becoming’, the maker starts to talk with it. And time after time, the maker is surprised because the model immediately starts to talk back to him. This is the real magic of the process: the maker is not only working for the model, but the model also starts to work for the maker. A visual and linguistic dialogue occurs!

That magical moment then has to be translated in a structured linguistic as well as a visual process of questions and answers.

This dialogue is conceived and processed with a consciously chosen ‘virtual third person’ who is ‘present’ in real time, being a critical but interested sounding board of the step by step procedure. This ‘virtual third person’ is chosen by the maker, and ‘he’ can even be replaced by another one during the process, because the maker of the scale model not only talks to the model that talks back, the maker also has to control the interested presence and effectiveness of that virtual witness of the process. So the rigorous and conscious choice of that ‘buddy’ is part of the method and essential to the rigorous coaching of the process as a constant legitimation check. The final responsibility remains thus with the maker.

With all the mentioned components of the design-research process well situated in the awareness of the maker, the more hands-on steps in the process can be undertaken. This will now be illustrated by 'monitoring' the process for 'The London Tapes One'.

This scale model has been designed and made to investigate and communicate the poetics in the architectural work of the author through three of his own architectural designs on the one hand, and the theme of the 'urban tendency' on the other hand. Therefore, the three designs were positioned in an imaginary urban fabric that is the denser version of a provincial town somewhere in Flanders.

Furthermore, the model has been designed to communicate the actual state of a PhD. It is a test to see if this communication by scale modeling works.

The design and production of the big scale model for London first had to go through the design and production of a small preliminary scale model of that big scale model. This has been done for several reasons.

Firstly, the concept of the big model itself had to be conceived, investigated and tested. The small scale model was conceived following the methods like those applied by painters, writers and film directors. A comparable concept has also been noticed by the author, when he was reading 'Ramble, linger and gaze: dialogues from the landscape garden', the PhD of Katja Grillner (Grillner, 2000). The concept of this PhD is based on an imaginary dialogue between two English gentlemen (who presumably never met each other) in the 18th century and the author herself who is a Swedish woman on the bridge of the 20th and the 21st century. But this concept combined with the concept of the imaginary (inner?) dialogue enables her to go in depth in the subject of research.

"In literature and film, multiple time frames can be mingled as an instrument to inform the reader and the viewer. Medieval painters collected appealing 'views' while 'on the road' in order to combine them by 'free' association in the pictorial compositions they made once they were back at home painting in their workshops, creating wonderful amplified worlds which inform us about deeper meanings in order to generate understanding ... The small scale model materially combines - on purpose! - distant geographic frameworks and far away time zones in order to inform and to emphasize the quintessential of the Polis in connection with Poetics in a body of work of an architect, leaving out the irrelevant miles and less important minutes in between the inches and seconds that really matter to both the urban fabric and the architectural body of work.

So, a designed, thus imaginary, and designable, thus real (!) urban fabric contracts the Polis to its essence by making it a denser version of itself." (Van Den Berghe, 2009)

The small-scale model appeared to be a very useful instrument to test its concept and the effectiveness of the communication of it. During the making,

the third person again was the alter ego of the maker, gradually combined with other real third persons as the process went on: a good colleague of Sint-Lucas School of Architecture in Brussels (thank you Dag), a visiting Professor from Oslo (I am so grateful Halina), the curator of the exhibition in London (hi Ken).

Secondly, there was the final scale that had to be investigated in terms of practical parameters, such as the feasibility of the big model in terms of budget and time schedule. So the small model structured the communication with the furniture maker who had to build the big scale model, in order to check his planning and timing and to give an idea of the cost. Furthermore the transport possibilities to London and back and how much this was going to cost could be checked by it. And of course the lay out of the exhibition in London could be designed by it. So here, the 'third person' was 'several third persons': the potential furniture maker, the transport company, the curator. At that moment, only the curator was known yet, so the model had to be precise and neutral.

But of course, there were also the parameters of content: the Poetic Image, with which every design starts, had to be materialized quickly in order not to lose it out of mental sight, and to quickly check the legitimacy of it. Here, the 'third person' for the Poetic Image was the author's alter ego, the personification of his poetic dimension.

Subsequently, what was the right scale in order to communicate the poetics of the architectural designs in the best possible way on the one hand and the urban tendency on the other hand in terms of shape, height and the way of 'positioning' it in the exhibition space, vis-à-vis with the viewer in order to reach him/her in optimized conditions? The 'third person' here were several real persons known by the author/the maker of the model, of whom he presumed interest in the subject and awareness of its content.

And last but not least, how could the concept of communication be communicated maximally with the curator of the exhibition in the preparation of it? The 'third person' here was the already known curator of the exhibition.

Thirdly, all the 'smaller' questions popping up during the production of the small-scale model were dialogued with the model itself, within the constant awareness of the attentive presence of the virtual third person commenting on the ongoing dialogue: which material to apply, the degree of detailing the 'neutral' city fabric in connection with the architectural designs, the presence or absence of trees and trains, etc...

All of these questions were answered by that small preliminary scale model, all the necessary communication has been made possible by it.

Poetics: a Catalyst for the reinvention of the Polis

"Hypnerotomachia fulfills its objective by demonstrating how architectural meaning is not something intellectual, a 'formal' question of proportional relationships or abstract aesthetic values, but rather originates in the erotic

impulse itself, in the need to quench our physical thirst: the existential condition to which humanity can only be reconciled within the realm of poiesis (the making of culture, i.e., art and architecture) and its metaphoric imagination. Poliphilo first experiences the overwhelming harmony of classical architecture and then, as soon as he measures the wonderful monuments he encounters, discloses the presence of precise proportional relationships. In his sensuous narrative this discovery of mathemata is constantly synthesized with a recollection of love; the effect of architecture is always beyond the purely visual, evoking the memory and expectation of erotic fulfillment. ” (Pérez-Gomez, 1992)

Architecture is about the sensuous balance of the Technics and the Poetics, finding themselves together in inclusion. Architecture cannot be the slave of the prescription of a formal calculated system of the mind, nor can it be the mere servant of technical or legal limitations.

Architecture starts with a Poetic Image, which emerges on the fertile grounds of a pre-conscious state of mind, imagining a possible future as being more an expression of desire of the body and the soul than an abstract product of the Cartesian mind, in that it challenges the Technics to mutate from problem solving necessity or omnipresent master into a serving friend who helps to facilitate the fulfillment of an expectation predicted by the Poetic Image of the Embryo.

There is mutual inclusion between the two connotations of the Greek word ‘poiesis’ in the act of creating architecture. The first significance of ‘poiesis’ to the Greek was situated in ‘the act of making’, the second connotation to them was ‘poetry’, in that the poetry was not to be separated from the making. The poetry was really intended to be ‘in’ the making. So, the making is at least as much about physical doing than it is about abstract thinking. Both of them combined in a sensuous balance result in the process of designing architecture: having the head in the clouds of mental experiment during the production of the Poetic Image as much as the physical hands-on act of drawing on paper and scale modeling in wood or metal and building the real prototype on the site with hard and solid matter and the force of gravitation going through the hands of the builder and through the experienced consciousness of the architect.

Poetics, in architecture like in other arts, is the only language inclusive enough to express the dense message of the soul, resulting in a warm embodied synthesis of knowing rather than in a chilled and distant analysis of knowledge. ‘An architecture’ has to reach the specific and legitimate expectations of the person and the place in an all-embracing movement of understanding the why?. ‘An Architecture’ cannot be allowed to reduce reality on the basis of an objective general principle that excludes subjective expectations so necessary to be humanly complete.

The process of the making of architecture starts with the Embryo, that Poetic Image emerging at the bright moment when mind and soul coincide in mutual consciousness. Then, step-by-step, the making takes a shape in the hard but patient matter of the world, constantly informed by the embodied experience and expectation of the maker. The embodied experience and expectation and the matter of the world involve themselves in an inner dialogue that comes on the stage of the creative vigilance of the maker, who is able to keep his focus by his awareness of the power of his senses projected on the story of the creation, which is about the way the creator sees himself and Mankind within the story of the world. Himself and his creation, with Mankind always present as that ‘virtual’ third person again, the one we also met during the making of the scale model as a quick registration of the Poetic Image... (cfr. supra).

This ‘presence of Mankind’ anchors architecture as the inclusive play of Poetics and Technics in the responsible role it has to play within the deeper story of Humanity: it materializes the otherwise immaterial realm of the Civics, it makes the shape of the Polis and brings its verbal and materialized discourse in its Agora. And then, the inner dialogue of the making within the maker comes out and communicates by all the architectural means at his disposal: his spoken and written words, his drawings, his scale models, his diagrams and calculations. And every now and then, his embryo transforms into the liberating reality of hard and patient matter: the built result of Architecture.

And through all this meticulous craftsmanship, the carpenter of the soul might produce a meaning -through design- for the Reinvention of the Polis through Poetics, mutating the self of his Poetic Image from possibility and fiction into fact!

My Life is over? Conclusions

Communication also emerges as a permanent inner dialogue between the architect and the researcher in the author of this essay. His research is about Poetics in Architecture and the Polis and is constantly informed by the story of his life and work. So this research cannot but be about finding himself in the middle of the subject of inquiry, not besides it. And by doing so, he acknowledges and permits himself to be the nearest and the best informant, a data base not to be ignored. His life and work turn into the subject of ‘a crime scene investigation’.

Moreover, the teacher in the author has a permanent inner dialogue with the architect and the researcher in the author. So there is three of them, each one informing and challenging the other two in a never-ending flow of communication, in which one out of them three always takes the character of the ‘virtual third person’, really being the one the other two are working for and who they accept as the necessary critical voice, the chorus in the play of ancient Greece. Quite a vivid and vibrant environment to dwell in!

These are some recommendations the author wants to address to himself: shelter your awareness as an architect, as a teacher and as a researcher as the context of your state of mind, keep a warm but vigilant eye on the presence and the quality of the communication -your inner dialogue- between them as your basic method. This environment enables you to be the servant of the shift of thought and context on one basic condition: to monitor the inner dialogue with honesty by discipline and rigor in adopting it as a method. Detect how Poetics is your subject in your own work and how it can make an appeal on the mind and the soul of every member of Mankind, communicate outwards to reach meaning in the transitory space between the Self and the World, that glorious in-between of understanding. Make it the story of the overwhelming walk between the Agora where you see 'her' and the Bed where you finally really meet 'her', the fairy tale of Romeo and Juliette, and that most meaningful moment under her balcony in the in-between (Ligtelijn and Strauven) the Agora and the Bed, that hesitating "...no" just before her liberating "Yes!"... .

Not only is the inner dialogue the necessary communication that drives the process of a design (i.e.: the design of a Supermodel of a Goddess), nor is communication the exclusive domain preserved for the discourse about a discipline called architecture, nor the medium of oxygen of which the alter ego's in the author -the architect, the teacher, the researcher- breathe and make each other live, but most of all : Architecture IS designed communication, able to tell the dense and amplified story of the Poetic Image of the Embryo in the Agora of the Polis, and out of the marriage between the Mind and the Soul emerges the Child who will tell the story of the world as it might be, through (communication of) Design.

So, Design IS communication....

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